Bella Coola Indians - Title & Introduction

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SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS LIFE OF THE BELLA COOLA

by

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The term Bella Coola can be applied to the Indians who formerly occupied more than twenty villages on the lower Bella Coola River in central British Columbia, and to their near kinsfolk on the Kimsquit River, and at the head of South Bentnick Arm. Disease and changed conditions consequent upon the coming of the white man have so reduced their numbers that the last two groups of settlements have been virtually abandoned, while only one village remains in the Bella Coola Valley. This is located on a reserve near the mouth of the river, and its four hundred inhabitants comprise practically all the survivors of what was once a tribe of several thousand people, with a distinctive language and culture of their own.

The material contained in this monograph was collected in this one village many years ago for the National Museum of Canada[1]. I was in the field during two periods that extended from March to August 1922, and from September 1923 to February 1924. My field notes were worked up as soon as other duties permitted and the completed manuscript submitted to the museum in 1926. Since that time it has suffered various vicissitudes. Recommended for publication by the Chief of the Anthropological Division, it passed through the hands of various editors; questions were raised as to the suitability of detailed studies of social anthropology in a government publication, and by the time this matter was adjusted, funds for extensive publications were unavailable and the manuscript was put aside. Since the aim of the investigation was to record, as far as possible, the sum-total of the complex and interwoven social life of the Bella Coola, I did not think it desirable to prepare short articles[2] summarizing different aspects, preferring

1. Then the Victoria Memorial Museum.
2. The only exception was a short article on Bella Coola supernatural animals published in the Annual Archaeological Report for 1924-25, pp. 17-27.

to await an opportunity for the publication of the manuscript as a whole. I am deeply gratified to the Social Science Research Council in Canada for making this possible.

Though the lapse of time between the field investigation and the appearance in print of the results is unfortunate, it is a matter of less importance than would be the case in other branches of science. To the student of social institutions, the significant fact is that a certain group of homo sapiens has practised certain customs, whether in 1922 or 1942 is immaterial. Furthermore, the aim of the investigation was to collect information on Bella Coola life as it was before the breakdown of their own culture, and for this, data collected twenty years ago are more valuable than those acquired today. The manuscript was prepared from my extensive field notes, when the material was still fresh in my mind and, with the exception of this preface and a few minor changes in editing,[1] is presented as it was written in 1924-26.

When studying the Bella Coola, I was definitely under the influence of the English school of anthropologists. To Haddon, Rivers, and Seligman, to name the outstanding English field anthropologists of their generation, the study of a native tribe meant an expedition to some far-off corner of the world, to a people about whom little was known. A return visit was improbable; aboriginal customs were passing away, hence it was the duty of the field investigator to learn and to record every scrap of information. I remember Dr. Haddon's insistence that it might be some trivial detail which would throw light on culture distribution, and hence, perhaps, aid in the reconstruction of tribal or racial movements, or in theoretical studies of the devdopment or degeneration of institutions. Characteristic of this school too, was the intense

1. Especially in the addition of twenty to the number of years which had elapsed since various incidents took place.

human interest in field work. To overcome the difficulties of language, of suspicion and of native reticence was a task in itself. And only when this was accomplished and the investigator recognized as a friend, could the information be obtained upon which the investigator was to describe "his people". As a broad generalization, the attitude of American anthropologists to field work in America is very different. Indians live near at hand; well educated interpreters and informants are usually available; there is no thought of gleaning information from suspicious natives at the ends of the earth; and, perhaps most important of all, so much of Indian life has disappeared that the American anthropologist must learn by interview and question, rather than by observation and participation. The American school has tended to return repeatedly, often for short periods, to a small group or even to a single informant, and to publish intensive studies of aspects of culture with which the investigator is concerned. Both approaches have their advantages. Anthropologically, using that term in its broadest sense, American Indians are better known than the natives of other continents; the professional anthropologist knows where to find the detailed studies in technical journals and government publications, and to combine them if he wishes to know the life of a people as a whole. But to the anthropologist who is not a specialist in America, as well as to scholars in other social sciences this lack of synthesis is a definite deterrent and it may well be asked whether the anthropologist has played his part in making known the results of his branch to workers in cognate fields. It was this which led R.H.Lowie to publish his Crow Indians[1], and though the author reiterates that the volume contains little that he had not made known in earlier writings[2] in anthropological journals, it is safe to say

1. New York: 1935.
2. See p. . On this point see C.M.Barbeau's review in Canadian Historical Review, vol. , p. . Lowie's colleague, A.L.Kroeber frequently advocates intensive distribution studies of elements of culture, deprecating the use of lengthy descriptions of tribal customs.

that the Crow Indians will be read, quoted, and used when other reports on which it is based have been forgotten.

If I were to investigate and report on the Bella Coola at the present time, I would undoubtedly be influenced by twenty years of contact with American anthropologists and their work. I would assume a greater knowledge of North-West coast institutions, less interest in the details of ceremonial rites, and it would be impossible not to avoid comparisons with, and observations upon, the theoretical implications of many of the facts recorded. But though every field investigator is strictly objective as to the facts he collects, yet his interests, and his method of presenting them are coloured by his background, in my case, by the older school of English anthropology. On the whole, I think this is fortunate. It means that the Bella Coola are portrayed as I saw them when I came fresh to a new field, practically uninfluenced by problems of North-West coast culture, and fully prepared to throw myself into their life. They were "my people", not a group in which I was interested because they had, or had not, certain culture traits with which I was concerned. In the course of my teaching experience, furthermore, I have wished repeatedly to give serious students detailed field monographs in which are recorded the social, religious, and folk-lore concepts of a people, the sum-total of their mental life, collected by one man at one time, with a view to showing their interdependence. This I have tried to do for the Bella Coola.

Following the English tradition, I wish to record how this material was collected. Before leaving for British Columbia, I was advised by the late H.I.Smith, who had worked in the area, to talk to Joshua Moody, an elderly Bella Coola Indian with whom Smith had

worked. On explaining to Joshua that I had come to record in permanent form the traditions and lore of his people, Joshua grinned broadly and promised his help. Unfortunately, he spoke only a few words of English. I tried interpreter after interpreter, Indian and white, with only fair success, and my difficulties increased with the opening of the canning season and the consequent employment of the younger men and women. I was urged to learn the Chinook jargon, which serves widely as a lingua franca on the coast, and began the study with much misgiving. The results were surprisingly satisfactory.

After a few weeks I found that I had sufficient knowledge of Chinook to dispense with interpreters and deal directly with the older people, a tremendous advantage. Pride of race and ancestry is one of the strongest characteristics of the Bella Coola, and once convinced of my sincere interest in and respect for their history, they were willing to talk. They resent the condescension with which most white men regard them, so that contact with one who was friendly and sympathetic came as a pleasant surprise. There were, of course, difficulties. The canning season had begun and every able-bodied man was working away from the village. The conviction of each person that he was the best source of information and that conferences with another were useless or unreliable caused distrust. The desire of each informant to discuss only what interested him; the complexity of Bella Coola life itself; the necessity of checking every statement, and the extreme difficulty of doing so on account of discrepancies in the myths of different families; the fear, almost groundless, of each individual that someone else had infringed on his rights by recounting some legend; and, not least, the need for tact, patience and a sense of humour under all conditions, were some of the obstacles to be surmounted. Nor was Chinook entirely satisfactory. It has enough words

for matters pertaining to fishing, hunting and trading, but for the realms of sociology or theology it is inadequate. This difficulty could not have been overcome without the patient help of my informants. Animated by the desire to help, they used every expedient in the way of parallel and synonym to explain obscure terms. Sometimes a younger man was called in for some abstruse meaning; more often it gradually became clear from different applications. Once the significance of a word was definitely understood, I made a note of it and used it henceforth. A useful vocabulary was thus built up, and conversations were carried on in mixed Bella Coola and Chinook, eked out by whatever English words were known by the person with whom I was working. Before I left, this medley contained so much Bella Coola that it was unintelligible to white people who knew Chinook alone.

Activities in the canneries would have interfered seriously with my work during the summer of 1922 if two men had not been confined to the village, Captain Schooner owing to an injured wrist and Jim Pollard by the illness of his wife. These two men were willing to work half a day apiece without jealousy. Each was intensely proud of the traditions of his people and, realizing that their culture was passing away, was glad to assist in making it permanent in writing. An intimacy sprang up between Captain Schooner (See Place 3) and myself culminating in my adoption, a circumstance which established and improved my position in the community. In this way I was enabled to collect a large amount of material before July when it was necessary for me to leave for the east.

In September 1923 when I returned to Bella Coola I found that Captain Schooner had died a few months before, respected alike by white men and Indians. With the aid of others with whom I had made

contact it was possible to obtain much new information, as well as to clear up many obscure points. The previous summer I had been so overwhelmed with material that I had no time to collate it in the field and the gaps only became apparent after a year's study. The men were so busy hunting and laying in stocks of fire-wood, however, that I found it difficult to arrange regular hours of work, but this was a trifle compared with the initial difficulties of my first trip. In October, when the Bella Coola began to prepare for the winter dances they had to appoint a successor to Captain Schooner, who had played a leading part in their production. Having been adopted by him, it was suggested that I take his place, a proposition which I readily accepted. This admitted me to the ranks of the old men, and I imagine that my interest encouraged them to hold more ceremonials than they had done for several years. In former times, a number of the older men used to devote much time and thought to the composing, remembering and rendering of songs; in 1923 it was found that Jim Pollard (See Plate 4) alone had a sufficiently accurate memory to act as announcer. As more and more men wished to perform, he found himself unable to keep the texts in order, and asked me to join the choir as prompter. I held this position for the rest of the winter, taking a full part in every ceremony. Although the old customs had broken down enormously, this actual participation enabled me to understand the winter dances in a manner impossible from mere description. Later on, phonographic records were made of many of the songs used, thus preserving specimens of the fast disappearing music.

My intimate association with the Bella Coola enabled me to collect the material here presented which, having been verified and reverified, I have every reason to believe is correct. Nevertheless,

it has one serious defect due to the lack of acuteness of my ear. I found it almost impossible to differentiate certain sounds; in fact, I sometimes recorded the same word with different spellings. Consequently, I cannot guarantee the accuracy of the native terms used in this monograph. Moreover, I was entirely unable to analyse proper names, for example, which would have been of great value in understanding the attributes of supernatural beings.

When writing up field notes, the realization of my own inefficiency in the recording of sounds tempted me to rely upon the spelling of Boas whenever possible. After considerable hesitation, I rejected this course for the following reason. Ethnological work falls into two categories, descriptive and comparative. This monograph is of the former type, based on actual work in the field and the inclusion of any material from another source would destroy its originality. I believe that a descriptive work should consist exclusively of the author's own research, and I have adhered to this principle in spite of the advantages which would have followed the use of Boas' linguistic terms. For the same reason no attempt has been made to compare the customs and beliefs of the Bella Coola with those of other tribes, although this could undoubtedly have shed light on obscure points. That is a task for the comparative student and nothing but confusion would result from such an incorporation in this volume. For the benefit of the reader, foot notes have been inserted referring to The Mythology of the Bella Coola Indians by Boas, the most comprehensive description of the tribe. In the field I deliberately disregarded published accounts.

And what of these people, the subject of this book?

The intimate experiences of the second winter in Bella Coola only confirmed my feeling of sadness at the decay of the old arts and

crafts. Music, painting, carving, weaving, story-telling, acting, all are passing away. Only a handful of the tribe survives, and of them the younger people are the white man and have little interest in the lore and customs of their fathers. I know of few sadder experiences than talking with some Bella Coola patriarch and realising the tragedy which he feels at the termination of his people's culture.

Though the individual may suffer, civilization must press onward and the life of the Indian will soon disappear. With it will pass forever, manners, customs, beliefs, rites and knowledge, data of value to students of man both now and in the future. Every year lessens the amount of information available. In Bella Coola, for example, the death of Captain Schooner left a gap which none could fill. Others must follow him, and within a short time there will be no ethnological work possible in that tribe. A tithe of the people may survive, but their culture, the growth of generations, will have been swept away.

Most of those to whom I am indebted for help in this study have passed away. Dr. A.C.Haddon and Dr. W.H.R. Rivers, both of Cambridge University, who were my mentors in anthropology are both dead; so too is Dr. E. Sapir, former Chief of the Anthropological Division in the National Museum who gave me instruction in phonetics, and Mr. M.I. Smith, Dominion archaeologist, to whom are due most of the photographs reproduced here. I can only place on record my deep obligation and gratitude to each of these four. Dr. D. Jenness, present Chief of the Anthropological Division, has been cooperative throughout, giving me freely of his time and experience. In Bella Coola, I was treated with uniform kindness by the white inhabitants, particularly Mrs. Clayton, Mr. and Mrs. Bert Robson, and Mr. and Mrs. Andy Christensen.

Finally, and most important of all, I wish to express my appreciation to the Bella Coola themselves. Without their generous, kindly and helpful cooperation, this book could never have been written. I came as an uninvited stranger; they treated me as a friend and a guest, and I left with intense regret. My chief friends were Joshua Moody, Captain Schooner, and Jim Pollard, but I was also greatly assisted by Mr. Willie Mack, Mr. and Mrs. Tallio Charlie, and Mr. and Mrs. Lame Charlie. To a host of others I am indebted in only a slightly less extent. The aid and friendship of these men and women is one of my pleasantest memories, and one which I wish to record in all gratitude and appreciation.

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